

IN: This past summer you were in Iona, and you just explained what prompted you to go there, and the resulting portraits that you took.

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LA: I went to Iona in June, and it was part of a three-month pilgrimage through Europe. I went to various kinds of religious communities, starting off in France, at Tesé, and then Switzerland, to a small Protestant monastery, it was actually Protestant sisters, then I later went to the Channel Islands, and then up to Scotland and went to Iona, which is a small island in the Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland, and spent two weeks there. During that time, I participated in a lot of the activities at the Iona abbey, which was at one time a Benedictine abbey, and then is now the headquarters of what is called the Iona community, a community that consists of about a hundred and forty people, who are actually scattered in various parts of the world, but have the abbey as their kind of spiritual headquarters, and about fourteen of them actually live on the island at the abbey at any given time. And the abbey receives visitors for week-long programs, where they participate in the rhythm of the life of the community. That includes going to services, and they also have discussions, and you work in the kitchen, and that kind of thing. I didn't stay at the abbey itself, I stayed in a bed-and-breakfast place, just near the pier on the island, and the reason for that was, I

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03       guess, twofold. I felt that I could still participate in  
04       the activities at the abbey without actually staying there,  
05       and that I would be more open to meeting islanders if I  
06       stayed in the bed-and-breakfast place, because there's a  
07       certain amount of, I don't know if the word is friction, but  
08       a certain kind of polarity between the people involved with  
09       the abbey and the islanders themselves, who are very, very  
10       deeply rooted on Iona, and I think there's a certain amount  
11       of resentment of the abbey people, who came in starting in  
12       about the 1930's, but in any kind of rural community, if  
13       your grandfather and your great-grandfather, and so on,  
14       wasn't born there, then you're still considered somehow  
15       strangers. So by staying at the bed-and-breakfast place,  
16       also, I wasn't hooked into any kind of schedule, and I real-  
17       ized after about a couple of days on the island that it  
18       would be, although I was there for personal reasons, I began  
19       to think in terms of a documentary project, both in terms of  
20       photography and in keeping a journal, and even at that point  
21       I began to envision some sort of project which would combine  
22       a text with the photographs. And once I began thinking of  
23       it, I didn't even photograph for the first two or three  
24       days, and I remember the first photograph I did take, it was  
25       in the evening, and it was beautiful, it was probably around  
26       six or seven in the evening, and there was a little boy with  
27       ginger-coloured hair playing in the road, and he was wearing  
28       a brown sweater and brown shorts, and he had a really tradi-

02 tionally Celtic face, that reminded me so much of some of  
03 Paul Strand's portraits, and his was the first portrait that  
04 I took, and that got me thinking more about how I wanted to  
05 study the island visually. And in a sense I did try and go  
06 about it in a, I don't know if I'd call it a scientific or a  
07 pseudo-scientific way, and I did think of the various acti-  
08 vities and the various places on the island. It's a very  
09 small island, but there are certain, fairly defined areas of  
10 activity. There's the pier, for instance, where you're get-  
11 ting the ferry boat coming in from the Isle of Maugh, which  
12 is about a mile and a half, I think, away, and then you  
13 have, there's one lobsterman, and so he has his boat at the  
14 pier, and then there's smaller boats which take people on  
15 tours around the Isle of Staffa and over to Maugh, and that  
16 kind of thing. And then you have supplies being brought in  
17 for the island. So that's some of the pier activity. And  
18 then there's a little restaurant nearby, and a couple of  
19 bed-and-breakfast places. So the pier was one centre, and  
20 then you had the abbey, and the little chapel, St. Oran's  
21 chapel, beside the abbey. That was another area of activi-  
22 ty, and then you had the various crofts, or farms, around  
23 the island, and then you had just the beaches and the areas  
24 that were completely uninhabited. Even though it's a small  
25 island, there are still stretches where you won't see another  
26 person. I spent a lot of time just wandering around the  
27 island, actually for hours, and would spend time just sort  
28 of sitting on the beach and that kind of thing.

IN: When you were photographing the people on the island, what was your approach? Were they primarily people who you didn't know, or you would meet someone, speak with them for a certain amount of time, and then ask them if you could take their photograph?

LA: Both. In some cases, I did get to know them quite well. The image which became for the exhibition which I had on Iona, the key image, was of a sculptor named Christopher Hall, and I didn't photograph Christopher until I'd known him for about a week, and I used to spend a couple of hours every day just watching him as he sculpted the capitals in the cloisters in the abbey, and sometimes we'd talk and sometimes I would just sit there and watch him, and he was working on the last capital in a series that he was doing on the birds of Scotland. So I watched him, actually, from the initial, from the preparatory sketches and so on, right through to completion of a capital, and I started to photograph after a few days, I don't know if it was a whole week or not, and I did, in fact, do a kind of series. I thought it would be nice record for him, because he had hoped that his brother-in-law would actually come up and film him doing this last capital, but he wasn't able to, so I did a series of images as well as that one portrait that I did of him. And he had been working in the abbey every summer for fifteen years. Other people, I would just meet along the road,

and often they would approach me, I think because it was a fairly unusual sight to see a woman like myself struggling along with my tripod, fairly bulky equipment, because I brought my 2½ camera as well as my 35, thinking in terms of architectural studies and that kind of thing, I thought I would use my 2½ for that and then use my 35 for more spontaneous portraits. So oftentimes people would actually approach me and start asking me about what I was doing and how long I was spending on the island, and I think because I spent more than just a couple of hours, because a lot of people just kind of wash in and out, they come over in the ferry boat, go up to the abbey, go into the shop and maybe buy a couple of things, and then leave again, but because I was there for a while, people, I think, accepted me more readily, and because, I guess, I showed an interest in the history of the island, in the family histories of the people I was meeting and so on, they were very, very receptive to me.

IN: What do you think are the potentials and the limitations of portraiture?

LA: The limitations, I suppose that the obvious limitation is that in any one photograph can you really capture all the facets of an individual? I think you can try to capture, you try to capture the essence, I think, of the individual,

but obviously, at any given time, you're leaving out a lot of different sides. So much is filtered through your own perceptions so much that how can you ever say that that's really definitive. I think to say that something is a definitive portrait is, I don't know if you can really say that or not. I think a friend of mine, Sam Tata, often says that a portrait is sixty, or even seventy, percent the photographer, and thirty percent the other person. I find, when I'm looking back on past work done at a given time, I realize how much it reflects my feelings at the time. So if I'm going through certain things emotionally, those things show up in my work, whether it's portraits or landscapes, or whatever it is. It naturally colours the kind of work that you're doing.

IN: So that essentially would be one potential of portrait work for you, the fact that it becomes a memory or a trigger.

LA: Yes, in that sense. Potential of portraiture, well, I think the obvious things, in showing a person's character or in showing him at a particular time in his life is obviously a wonderful thing to be able to do.

IN: Why did you have this exhibition of portraits from Iona? Did you want that material to be accessible to other people? What was the idea?

LA: It was very much a personal kind of sharing that I wanted to do. When the Saidye Bronfman Centre approached me, Peter knew that I'd taken this trip through Europe and he asked me if I had photographed, and he had suggested doing something on all the communities that I went to. I wanted to restrict it to Iona, primarily because I really hadn't photographed that much at the other communities. I think that I hadn't been sure how receptive these communities would be to the idea of having someone document, and I hadn't gone there primarily to do that, although I'd certainly now, if I went back, I would want to do that, and feel that I could do it more readily because of the experience of having gone through it in a very personal way. So I suggested that I just restrict myself to Iona, and I thought of it as a very personal kind of sharing of the experience that I had had on Iona, and I think the dominant feeling of that experience was a sense of peace, a sense of calm, it was a kind of retreat for me from the weary world, whatever, and I wanted to be able to create that sense, both through the images, which weren't, of course, just portraits, they were also landscapes and architectural studies, and through the words which were drawn, were excerpted from the journal that I'd kept during my trip. I wanted to re-create the experience, essentially. It wasn't a documentary exhibition in the sense of, well, Jeffrey James, at the conference in Fredericton, for instance, gave a definition of social documentary

as documentary which is working toward change of some condition that's alterable. And I guess it wasn't a documentary in that sense, but it was a way of perhaps trying to get people to pause for a moment, to think about the underpinning of our life, the spiritual side of our life, which is something that Iona is very closely connected to. It's a very special place, not only in terms of Christian history, but in terms of a kind of mysticism, I guess, because long before St. Columba arrived there it was a centre for the Druids. In fact, there's a wonderful story that's probably apocryphal, that when St. Columba arrived in this leather coracle, with his disciples, in 563 A.D., that he was met by a Druid chief at the beach, and the Druid chief said to him, have you come to take away our faith. And St. Columba said, what is your faith? And the chief drew with a stick in the sand a circle to represent eternity, and St. Columba said, no, I've come to add to it, and he drew the cross within the circle, hence the origin of the Celtic cross.

IN: When you put the words with the photographs, do you think that it increases the information that you are able to deduce from the photograph?

LA: I think it's a very tricky thing, and I'm certainly still working on that, because there's always the danger of writing something that is self-evident in the photographs, and

when I set up the exhibition, I did set it up like pages in a book, and I had the text always on the right-hand side, so that when you went through the exhibition, if you followed it the way you were supposed follow it through, you would see the image first, and then read the text, because I didn't want you to see the image and to have been influenced by having read the text previously. I hope that it supplements somehow the image, that it doesn't necessarily tell you how to read the image, but that it gives you additional information. It tells you how I felt, basically, when I was working with that image.

IN: Yes, it definitely has the quality of a personal diary, personal journal, not necessarily directly related, either, to the image. Do you want to just give us an example of the type of writing that would be included with the images.

LA: Sure. One thing I could read would be the very short introduction. Because it was a documentary exhibition, I realized that people knew nothing about Iona or its history, I included a map at the beginning, and then I included a fairly long text about the island itself and its history, and then a shorter text explaining why I went there.

"In the spring of 1981, as part of a personal pilgrimage to several religious centres in Europe, I spent two happy and

profoundly peaceful weeks on Iona. I attended services and other activities at the Iona Abbey, talked to islanders and fellow visitors, and wandered endlessly over hill and dale. The text below, and accompanying my photographs, is based on entries in the journal I kept during my trip.

"Iona, recollections of pilgrimage.

"I shall never forget that morning in May when I first set eyes on Iona. A fierce wind whipped around me as I stood on the ferry deck, but it was sunny and clear, a rarity in the Hebrides. Looking back, I saw the Isle of Maugh receding in the distance, and the seagulls riding the slipstream, crying out raucously in delight. Looking ahead, I saw the small rocky island which had prompted me to travel on innumerable planes, trains, buses, and boats. I was a pilgrim at the end, and the beginning, of my journey. My spirits soared.

"Two weeks passed and I boarded the ferry once more. I left Iona filled with the wonder of the place and of the people I had encountered: the stone-carver, the crofter, the weaver, the lobsterman, clerics and laymen, residents and visitors, all drawn to the same shores as St. Columba. While I took one last lingering look through the drizzle, I remembered what so many islanders had told me: if you've been to Iona once, you'll be back three times. I felt consoled at the prospect of my future return."

So that was the text which opened the exhibition in a more personal way. And if you'd like, I could read a couple of passages that accompanied portraits or whatever.

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08 IN: Perhaps the one of the stonecutter. Do you have that?

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10 LA: I thought I had it, I'm sorry, it's not there after all.

11

12 IN: Okay, we'll just pick another one.

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14 LA: Shall I describe the image to you? It's a little hard to  
15 describe, I guess. I don't know if I should try and de-  
16 scribe it or not, it's a bit hard to. Well, you would show  
17 the image ...

18

19 Okay, this image is entitled "The North End of the Island,  
20 Iona."

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22 "Anxious to see the last rays of sun at the north end of the  
23 island, I made my way through a pasture swarming with rab-  
24 bbits emboldened by the approaching dusk. I came across a  
25 curious gate, designed to keep the sheep from straying onto  
26 the beach. It was a fanciful creation, which made use of a  
27 bedspring."

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29 "Claire in Charlotte Hall, Iona."

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I was enchanted with Chris Hall's daughters, Claire and Charlotte. They were simply lovely. They had spent all their childhood summers on Iona, and loved to ride around the island on their bicycles, together, or with their younger brother, Robin. Their favourite destination was the pier, where they watched the ferry loading and unloading, and smaller boats departing for, or arriving from, a day's fishing, or a tourist expedition to the Isle of Maugh or Staffa. It was one evening at the pier, in fact, that I had the overwhelming desire to photograph the two sisters, to try to convey the children they still were, and the women they would become."

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17 "Christopher Hall, Stone-Carver, Iona Abbey."  
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19 "I stood in the shadow of the cloisters and watched the  
20 stone-carver chipping away at the capital with a pick and  
21 claw, and smoothing the surface with the pumice. He and his  
22 satchel of tools were coated with a fine layer of the sand-  
23 stone dust. I timidly asked a few questions. He answered  
24 patiently, even though, as I soon discovered, visitors asked  
25 him the same things repeatedly. His name was Chris Hall,  
26 and we struck up a friendship. Indeed, I cherished the hour  
27 or two that I reserved each day to sit nearby as he worked,  
28 sometimes in silence, sometimes talking with him about art,  
29 life, and Christianity."  
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IN: We talked briefly before about the lack of orientation or the lack of direction that some photographers have, and you talked about the need for an orientation, research, a specific idea behind your photographs and your writing. Can you just add to that a bit?

LA: Well, I think it's probably partly because of my orientation as a journalist, and the fact is that when I first started to photograph, back in 1971, although it was partly as a means of artistic expression, I also saw photography as an adjunct for my writing, and as a journalist, obviously, you have to have a very clear focus for an article or whatever your writing project is. And I feel that the same thing should and can be applied to photography. So that when you go to do an article, obviously you do background research and then you do your interviews, and so on, and then you pull the whole thing together. And I think that too often photographers go out and they do their work very, very intuitively, they're simply reacting to things, they're not really thinking through very carefully what it is that they're trying to convey. I don't think that you should become too rigid, obviously I think that you should leave yourself very open to situations that can unfold as you are working in the field, but I'm trying now to develop projects, to really think about them before I go out and start to shoot, and the one that I'm currently working on is on

teenage girls. And I think that was prompted, partly, by my experience with Claire and Charlotte on Iona. I found that age, they were about twelve and fourteen, and I felt that this is a very special age, because it's really on the threshold of womanhood, and it's at the age when you're still a child in some ways, and yet you're still a woman, and girls at that age have, I think, different degrees of self-consciousness about their sexuality, and they're trying out a lot of different kinds of roles and so on. And one thing that I was interested in is in seeing to what degree the feminist movement has had an effect on girls of this age. And it seems as if it hasn't had that much of an effect. I think it's because girls at that age are just highly susceptible to romantic idealism, and at that age they're not very interested in the feminist movement. Even those that I photographed whose mothers, for instance, are really quite ardent feminists, in fact, sometimes their daughters are the ones who are the most anti-feminist and feel that things are just fine the way they are, and they're more interested, at this age, in getting the attention of boys, in putting on their make-up, and that kind of thing. But I think it's interesting, not only to photograph them, but to interview them, and I think it really does amplify the images, to have the excerpts from the interviews, or, in a couple of cases, from things that the girls themselves for journals or for school assignments, that kind of thing.

IN: How do you go about doing the research for this project?

LA: In this case, I've been collecting articles, trying to read anything I can on the subject, talking to other people who've worked in the area, giving courses, or people who've done other kinds of documentary projects on it. And what often happens is that someone knows that you're interested in it, and then they mention, well, so-and-so has done some work in the States on that area or something of that kind. So you go and you try and find out what you can about it. And then, obviously, just going out and finding the girls and interviewing them. What I usually do is try and interview them on one occasion, and then photograph them on a later occasion, although sometimes it's happened that I've had to do it at the same time. But if I can interview them beforehand, then I get a much better sense of who they are and how I'd like to try and capture them on film. Some of the girls, by the way, I have known. There's one that I had photographed a couple of years ago for her parents, and we got to be kind of friends at that time, and then I naturally thought of her when I started to work on the project. And another project that I'd worked on, that also I think was a kind of background for this one, was on summer camps. And I photographed, particularly, at Camp Dolowan, which is the YWCA camp, because I've been on the Board of Directors of the YW for three years, and I've been on the camp committee,

so every summer I've gone up to camp and photographed, and, again, have been particularly drawn to girls of that age. So that was another reason, I think, that I wanted to develop this project.

09 IN: Is there information which is revealed by the photographs  
10 which might increase your understanding about adolescent fe-  
11 males?

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13 LA: I think so, because one thing that I began to notice, and  
14 I've really just started the project, but it almost bothered  
15 me, at first, that I seemed to be getting romantic kind of  
16 images. Not quite David Hamilton, but somewhere along those  
17 lines. And then I realized it's often because that's what  
18 the girls are projecting. They have a tendency to, the way  
19 they hold their bodies and so on, in some cases they hold  
20 themselves quite awkwardly, but in other cases they have a  
21 way of kind of curling up like cats, which is actually quite  
22 sensual, although the couple that I'm thinking of who did  
23 that are quite unaware, I think, of how really sensual they  
24 are. But all these things were coming through in the images  
25 almost against my will, or I felt, why am I getting these  
26 very romanticized-looking images, and that's that the girls  
27 were projecting. So, yes, I think it is saying something  
28 about that whole age.  
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IN: Does it concur with the information that you get in the interviews, or is it in contradiction?

LA: No, it usually does in fact concur. What they talk about, in terms of their expectations of marriage and that kind of thing, and then the whole of phenomenon of best friends, that comes out almost always in the interviews, and in one case I photographed the two girls who are best friends, and they talk about each other in the interviews.

IN: Is this a long-term project?

LA: It is, it's an ongoing project, it's something that, whenever I have a chance, whenever I meet a new girl or hear about one, then I'll keep plugging away at it. Because I have to earn my living at other kinds of work, it's something that I have to kind of tuck in on the side. That's something, I think, that a lot of photographers have to contend with, that unless we have a grant, then we have to do these things when we can.

IN: Do you tend to work in projects?

LA: I prefer to, I think, work in projects. I guess I did less of that when I was younger, but now somehow I like to have that kind of coherence to a project, rather than just taking

random individual images, although certainly if one comes up, if I see something, I'm not going to pass by it just because it's not part of a project that I'm working on, because it might become part of another project. I'm just thinking, for instance, of the St. Patrick's Day parade. I went this year, and I think I only did one portrait during the parade, I just spent half an hour or something walking along, because I've gone to the parade almost every year, and photographed every year, and at some point I may actually have enough photographs to actually put together a project on the St. Patrick's Day parade. So just out of the more or less random photographs that I've taken through the years of the parade.

IN: Portraits tend to manifest themselves in all the projects, and go from the black and white work to polaroids. Do you notice a shift in the type of work that you do in the two different formats?

LA: In colour and black and white, or you mean specifically in polaroid, which is a very different kind of medium. Well, I worked with polaroid when I took the polaroid workshop in Arles in 1979, and I think that the thing that I liked best about it was being able to give the person one of the images right away, and to, in a sense, work with the person, who could see the kind of images that I was producing, be-

03 cause I would take several polaroids, usually, before I came  
04 up with the one that I really liked, simply because you have  
05 to make all these adjustments in terms of exposures and so  
06 on, but also because you can see, it's like sketching, real-  
07 ly, and then you can come up with the final product and you  
08 have the sketches right there, you don't have to wait at  
09 all. Surprisingly, I think, considering it is such a dif-  
10 ferent medium, although they're in colour I think that the  
11 polaroid portraits don't differ all that much from the black  
12 and white ones. And the reason that portraiture is so pre-  
13 dominant in my work is, I think, because I have a passion  
14 for people, and that's something that emerged after a couple  
15 of years of photographing, because initially I was rather  
16 shy about photographing people, I felt quite self-conscious  
17 about using my camera with people, and when I first started  
18 to photography out at the Banff Centre in 1971, and way back  
19 in '72, I was photographing nature primarily. But once I  
20 started to photograph people I never looked back, so to  
21 speak.

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24 IN: Okay, I have one last question. Can you identify a photo-  
25 grapher in Quebec whose work you respect, whose work you  
26 think is important?

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28 LA: Well, I think there's more than one in Quebec. Someone  
29 who's a personal friend, whose work I admired even before I

03 had met him, is Gabor Szilasi. I guess he works in some-  
04 what, he works with large format and so on, but I think  
05 there's some kind of underlying philosophy that I feel would  
06 be somewhat the same as mine. I really hate to single some-  
07 one out because there are others as well, people like Sam  
08 Tata, whose work I admire, and younger photographers who are  
09 working now, too. So that's a tough question.

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